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Getting Under Your Skin: Sebald on Chatwin and Flaubert

Abstract

Melancholy is a well-established tool in critical work on W.G. Sebald. Yet the aggressivity associated with it, particularly in the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein, has not provoked sufficient critical attention to the subtle violence at work in Sebald's writing, particularly in his references to other writers. This violence is exemplified in a consistent focus on the skin, which, as a double of the surface of the text, is often the object of destructive or consumptive processes. Sebald's prose weaves complex processes of the desiccation of the skin, on the one hand, and its susceptibility to invasive infection, on the other, around the textual figures of Chatwin and Flaubert. If skin, in Sebald's work, seems prone to a global tendency towards entropic finality, toward dust, this has important consequences for our conception of the textual surface of his work.

Keywords: W.G. Sebald, melancholy, aggressivity, skin

Getting Under Your Skin: Sebald on Chatwin and Flaubert

The melancholic turn of W.G. Sebald's prose has been a recurrent feature of critical commentary on his work: an early critical volume names Sebald the "Anatomist of Melancholy" (Görner), as if to suggest that Sebald is pursuing the legacy of Robert Burton; through its title alone *The Rings of Saturn* consecrates the melancholic temperament as the dominant mood of the writing; Dora Osborne remarks of *The Emigrants* that the nomadic tendencies of Sebald's protagonists are "resisted by the overwhelmingly melancholic force of traumatic history, which ultimately determines the course of Sebald's narratives" (Osborne 106); Greg Bond notes Sebald's confessed affinity with the seventeenth-century English writer Thomas Browne, who, in *The Rings of Saturn* is accredited by Sebald with the view that "On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation" (23-4, cited in Bond 39); Eric Santner, in the extraordinarily rich study *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, sees in melancholy the driving force of Sebald's work, and explores the deep ramifications of this insight, extending from the affective tonality of melancholy in the writing itself, into the politics and sexuality of the "creature," whose subjectivity, and whose very posture, is defined by subjection to a rageful Other. To some extent, as he confesses, in investigating the "vicissitudes of melancholy" Santner is merely following a "well-beaten

path"; yet in the course of his study melancholy undergoes some quite startling metamorphoses and begins to resemble something more akin to aggressivity, closer to the kind of rage against internalized fantasy objects encountered in the writing of Melanie Klein than to the crepuscular mood one might have supposed (Santner 43, 45).

A good example of this is Santner's focus on the image of skeletons and skulls in *Austerlitz* when the eponymous protagonist is discussing the excavations of London; Santner links this to the narrator's commentary on Rembrandt's painting of the anatomy lesson in the same book, and points to the recurrence of the motif of flayed skin at the end of the novel when Austerlitz visits a museum of veterinary medicine at Maisons-Alfort in Paris. Looking at the encounter with Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson, and at the incidence in the Maisons-Alfort museum of "truly horrific creatures consisting of little more than a scrap of skin, a crooked wing and half a claw" (373), among other similarly monstrous exhibits including the flayed horseman, I am prompted to suggest that Sebald's melancholic mode often makes itself felt as an assault on the body and in particular on the integrity of the body, on the corporeal envelope of the skin. This thought has provoked the hypothesis, which I interrogate in what follows, that there is a strong association in Sebald's

writing, and in particular in his engagement with other writers, between writing and the skin, and that this is an expression of an aggressive turn of melancholy. A fruitful consequence of this idea may be an adjustment to the often hagiographic and mournful critical mood in which Sebald's texts are approached, an adjustment occasioned by an account which sees their melancholy as the disguise of a rageful and destructive urge and which often takes the route of a vampiric incorporation of other writers or artists.

If the world supposed by Sebald's writing seems to have fallen entirely under *der Schatten des Objekts* – the shadow of the object – to paraphrase Freud's rendering of melancholia (Freud 179) – to be a world suffused by loss, Klein's account of the terrain left in the wake of this shadow presents it instead as a war zone. In key essays such as "The Psychogenesis of Manic Depressive States" Klein's intensifies what Freud expresses as the ego's impoverishment and self-beratement, finding in the psyche a rageful aggressivity against and on the part of bad objects, and a paranoid defense of good objects, which also exact their own punishments. To bring Sebald and Klein together is to begin to draw out the violence and aggression inherent in Sebald's texts. Klein's account of the psychic strife wrought by the co-existence in the ego of "extremely bad and *extremely perfect* objects" (Klein 123) might help us to

understand the almost unbearable intensity of reading Sebald, the often stark contrast between the extreme perfection of the textual surface of his work, and the extremities of destruction and violence, however subtle, in its contents. This would be to see the Kleinian war as being played out in Sebald's writing in the interrelations of form and content, where form is surface, the surface of the page or of a syntax worked (polished) to perfection, and where content is literally that which is contained by this surface or envelope. This would be to see Sebald's writing as a sublimation of the violence of its contents by a literary enterprise which, in Kleinian terms, is essentially reparative, an attempt to restore, but also to save and to protect, the idealized lost object.

To think the motif of the skin through this dynamic of surface of content might, however, lead us to a different kind of conception. The psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu has usefully radicalized Klein's account of the internal world through a re-valorization of the skin as container, protective boundary, and communicative interface, proposing with the notion of the skin-ego a powerful extension of Kleinian theory which attends more closely to the body. It is the third of these attributes – the skin as communicative surface – which is most provocative for me here, insofar as it provides a conceptual basis for the association of skin with text: the skin as a surface on which something is

inscribed (with all the connotations of violence and torture that this invokes), but also the skin as a surface prone to marks, to infection or consumption. The textual imaginary draws much, in other words, from the phenomenology of the skin.

The medieval scholar Sarah Kay has written extensively on the "doubling" that takes place between the material surface of medieval manuscripts and the kinds of suffering undergone by the protagonists of the tales written upon them, focusing in particular on flaying as a spark setting off a "short circuit between textual content and the material state of the page" (Kay 36). Drawing on the third of the functions Anzieu attributes to the skin, as communicating and inscribing surface, Kay looks at the multiple associations between skin and text, especially those provoked by the often flawed parchments of medieval manuscripts. But she moves beyond the literal and material dimension of her study in suggesting, in the more theoretically oriented conclusion to her essay, the ways in which the skin can be considered as a crucial element of the process of thinking as such. Pointing to Anzieu's proposition of the skin and its sensuous receptivity as "a model for all subsequent forms of reflexivity," she writes: "The subsequent turning inside-out of the outer world into inner objects is enabled by [the] capacity for

reflexivity inscribed in the skin. The process of reading is such a process, in which the writer's self is turned inside out to form a textual envelope which can then be assumed by the reader" (Kay 60). Kay also turns to Gilles Deleuze, and in particular to his work *The Logic of Sense*, for an approach she finds "more germane" to her own, due to the emphasis on the surface as itself productive of sense (*sens*) at the expense of the essentially Platonic inside/outside model which is so conspicuous in Klein, and which still retains its hold in Anzieu's work. This perspective troubles the form/content dynamic I postulated earlier. Just as, for Kay, "Deleuze […] distances himself more radically and decisively than Anzieu from the Kleinian notion of the self as 'content'," we are led to see the surface of Sebald's text less as a container holding dangerous or poisonous "contents," and more as a surface "multiply folded over on itself," on which diverse effects of sense are actualized (Kay 61). According to this view, the violence of Sebald's writing, the war of its "contents," takes place on the surface of the text, rather than beneath or inside it. The textual surface is not, uniquely, a sublime and sublimating perfect object, but the site or plane of conflict itself.

I want to approach, in this essay, some of the forms of "doubling" – between skin and text, text and skin – that are at work in Sebald's writing. I will argue

that there is in these forms a high degree of reflexivity, such that it is in his attention to the literary endeavor as such, particularly to the work of other writers or scholars of literature, that Sebald comes closest to the skin. I will also argue that Sebald subjects the skin to a variety of more or less subtle forms of aggression, forms which move, in broad terms, between the extremities of contraction and expansion, between the skin as shrunken or desiccated relic, and the skin as a surface susceptible to loosening, layering, and forms of contagious consumption. Anzieu's "psychic envelope," the "multiply folded surface" Kay draws from Deleuze, are rendered in Sebald as a surface prone to catastrophe and conflagration, to an erasure or effacement of the world; Sebald's surfaces seem destined in this sense to fade to black. And yet, something remains; towards the end of the essay, through a return to Santner's commentary and a subsequent recourse to Walter Benjamin, I will address the questions posed by this paradox of loss and retention.

In an essay on Bruce Chatwin titled "The Mystery of the Red-Brown Skin: an approach to Bruce Chatwin," included in the posthumous collection *Campo Santo*, Sebald makes the following remark about the "avidity" with which Chatwin approaches the undiscovered:

> Inspired by a kind of avidity for the undiscovered, they [Chatwin's writings] move along a line where the points of demarcation are those strange manifestations and objects of which one cannot say if they are real, or whether they are among the phantasms generated in our minds from time immemorial. (179-80)

Avidity, which later in the essay semantically generates the idea of promiscuity, both terms qualifying Chatwin's writing and life, are also, for Sebald, associated with death, since he later describes Chatwin's writing as "a late flowering of those early traveller's tales going back to Marco Polo where reality is constantly entering the realm of the metaphysical and miraculous, and the way through the world is taken from the first with an eye fixed on the writer's own end" (180). This latter point announces the theme of mortality and associates avidity and promiscuity with the risk of an untimely end.

There follows the first of a series of references to canonical texts of French literature. Sebald refers to Flaubert's "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator" as "one of Chatwin's favourite books" (180); but the slight impetus here surely bears the heavier weight of a line in Sebald's writing, connecting the motif of skin to that of mortality. In effect, Flaubert's tale serves ostensibly as

the basis for a commentary by Sebald on the psychological type of its author Gustave Flaubert, a "profoundly hysterical disposition," which Sebald then somewhat nonchalantly attributes to Chatwin:

> I cannot read a page of this terrifying story, the product of its author's profoundly hysterical disposition, without seeing Chatwin as he was, an *ingénu* driven by a panic need for knowledge and love, still like an adolescent at the age of thirty. (180-1)

This follows a very brief account of Flaubert's tale, in which Sebald emphasizes St Julian's need to atone for the sins of bloodshed he has incurred through his passion for hunting. St Julian's avidity, which drove him to inconceivably destructive ends, and led him ultimately, through his need to atone, to his own end in the arms of a leper, leaks out of its fictional frame to characterize Flaubert, and then, through a sleight of hand, Chatwin, whose *panic* reprises Flaubert's *hysteria*. Linked to the motifs of avidity and promiscuity (both literary and biographical), the encounter with the leper in Flaubert's tale functions as a particularly telling instance of the "end" on which the writer has fixed his eyes: an encounter with a skin, or with skin, both living and dead, divested of its status as the living envelope of the living

being, and becoming nothing more than parchment, a parchment whose propensity to shrink holds the fortunes of the living body of the writer.

The reference to Flaubert is of course an echo of an encounter which according to his own fantasy set Chatwin off on his journey, the encounter with the remnant of an extinct animal's skin in his grandmother's "cabinet of wonders," subsequently discarded and lost. It is to re-find this remnant, or its origin, that Chatwin set off for Patagonia, the record of which was to be his first, generically unidentifiable book *In Patagonia*; another journey towards an encounter with the skin, with skin this time as a remnant, just as the skin of the leper is itself a remnant, a skin shed. Sebald comments on the undeniably fetishistic character of the giant sloth skin for which Chatwin was searching: "Entirely without value in itself, it inflamed and satisfied the lover's illicit fantasy" (184). The fantasy Sebald is re-constructing for Chatwin, via Flaubert, is the fantasy of an (amorous) encounter with a lifeless skin, a parchment, on which his destiny is written. It is a fantasy which upholds the encounter by the writer with their own writing, a skin which they have now shed and which henceforth holds their destiny. The motif of avidity and promiscuity, the hysteria or panic which is the drive to write, is inevitably

linked to the theme of mortality associated with a skin designated as a remnant, something divested.

It is not entirely unexpected then that at the end of his account of Chatwin's literary biography, Sebald turns to Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin* (*La Peau de chagrin*):

> The key myth, in any case, was always that piece of foreign skin, a relic that, like all mortal remains devoutly preserved and put on show, has something perverse about it, and at the same time something pointing far beyond the realm of the secular. It is an item that, as in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, grants even our most secret and shameful wishes, but shrinks a little with the bestowal of each desired object, so that the gratification of our amorous longing is intimately related to the death wish. (185-6)

Sebald draws out of Balzac's novel, almost surreptitiously introduced as a parallel, or an avatar, of Chatwin's giant sloth skin, the profoundly Freudian, or perhaps more precisely Bataillean logic of the link between desire and death. *Avidity*, or more precisely, the *satisfaction* of avidity proportionally

shortens the span of a life and increases the imminence of death. Here the fictional motif hangs this moral and psychic law on the strange object which the skin is, a remnant, a relic, which bears the trace of a presence through contact but attests simultaneously to the finitude and mortality of the life it contains. It was and it is no more. Sebald's reference to Balzac's novel inscribes the motif of a life bound to the skin and its decrepitude into Chatwin's biography, extending the fantasy of the encounter with a remnant of the giant sloth's skin across Chatwin's life, and thus crossing between fiction and biography. He grafts the shrinking skin motif of Balzac's novel into Chatwin's biography with little obeisance to the limits and lines of demarcation between fiction and life-writing:

> In a television interview given by Chatwin not long before his death we see him already wasted to little more than the proverbial skin and bone with eyes dreadfully widened, but talking with an innocent and unprecedented passion about his last fictional character, Utz, the china collector of Prague. It is the most shattering epiphany of a writer that I know. (186)

Sebald's almost dismissive "proverbial skin and bone" evokes and at the same time disavows the thread of skin that runs through these pages; Chatwin, a writer whose trajectory is oriented, "from the first," towards the end, of life as well as of the land, the ends of the earth, is depicted as "wasted" to a shred, like the wild ass's skin whose disappearance coincides with that of Raphael, the hero of Balzac's novel.

The reference to Chatwin's last novel *Utz* provides a link to Sebald's final point, which returns us to the beginning of Balzac's novel. Chatwin, an "avid" collector, of objects as of people, is implicitly present in Sebald's evocation of the storehouse in which Raphael first encounters the magical talisman. Sebald writes of Balzac's description of the objects of the storehouse as "an act of authorial prostitution," in the lack of inhibition with which the novelist sets out "his whole mania for reality and words" (186). The motif of avidity, promiscuity and hysteria resurfaces here in the "uninhibited" and maniacal character of Balzac's prose, as if Sebald were implicitly pathologising the avidity of the collector and its equivalent as a mode of writing, a characteristic he is not without sharing. But this mania for collecting and for documentation are linked by Sebald to the theme which one might say dominates and drives

his own oeuvre, his own mania – the rage to record the trace of that which is constantly being destroyed and forgotten:

> In the fantastic storehouse, designed as a kind of casket containing the world and inhabited by a desiccated little man over a hundred years old, the writings of the geologist Cuvier are recommended to Raphael as true works of poetry. In reading them, says the assistant leading him through the galleries of the emporium, you will glide over the unlimited chasms of the past, raised aloft by his genius, and as you discover the fossils of antediluvian creatures stratum by stratum in the stone quarries of Montmartre and the shale of the Urals, your soul will shrink with dismay at the sight of the billions of years and millions of nations forgotten by the short memory of mankind. (186-7)

Desiccation, the shrinking of the body and the drying out of the skin as its connection to the living tissue of the body is forgotten, is here bound to a shrinking of the soul, and the shortening of memory, to the process of destruction that, for Sebald, seems everywhere in train, which haunts and drains the present and provokes, in some, a hysterical need to grasp onto objects and to words.

Flaubert's *conte* and Balzac's novel thus provide Sebald with a series of linked motifs – destruction, mania, the skin – which he draws across his survey of Chatwin's life and work. Given the range of references to other authors one suspects that Chatwin himself and his writing have little purchase on Sebald's pursuit of his own obsessions. Indeed one might suggest, paraphrasing Sebald, that "in what amounts to an act of authorial vampirism," the German writer exploits the ostensible object of his essay – Chatwin – in order to consider the canonical texts of French literature which he references (there is also Lévi-Strauss, and Perec), and that these texts are themselves indexes to the obsession with loss and destruction which compels him.

Chatwin, then, is a fortuitous encounter. Sebald's remark that Flaubert's St Julian was one of Chatwin's "favourite books" is not borne out by the biographical evidence in Nicholas Shakespeare's authoritative biography of Chatwin, while *Trois contes* does feature on a list of "favourite books" compiled by Sebald himself (see Catling and Hibbitt 264). A further co-incidence which one suspects hides a design or an authorial strategy occurs in the essay "The Alps in the Sea," also in the volume *Campo Santo*, as Sebald recalls his visit to Corsica in 1996. Having moved through an extended

meditation on the former forests of Corsica, the flora and fauna that inhabited them, the "fever of the chase" in hunting season, horror at the sight of dead animals, fear of butchers' shops and the absurdity of "those evergreen plastic ornaments," (43) which surround cuts of meat in English butchers, Sebald then evokes an afternoon back in his hotel room in Piana. The meditation on hunting coincides, or is perhaps provoked by the discovery in a drawer of the bedside table, of a Pléiade edition of Flaubert, in which he begins to read Flaubert's version of the tale of St. Julian. Sebald disavows the design and the desire behind this encounter, with this *conte* in particular, by which he says he was "both fascinated and disturbed," and which he says he approached "with reluctance" (43).

To approach something with reluctance, and yet to approach it, speaks of the transgressive attraction of that which is feared, of the object of phobia. The way in which Sebald expresses this idea gives more pause, especially given the motifs in the essay on Chatwin that I have foregrounded above: "Even the episode of the killing of the church mouse, an explosion of violence in a boy who until that moment had always behaved well, got under my skin most uncomfortably" (44). This further fortuitous encounter allows me to find in Sebald's encounter with Flaubert, or to project onto it, the proposition that the

literary enterprise, of writing as of reading, "gets under the skin" in a particular way; fascination with something to be feared, with the disturbing or transgressive, entails a separation from the skin, a first flaying of the skin itself as parchment or remnant and as living tissue. The reader of Sebald's essay, as perhaps of Flaubert's *conte*, will see or imagine for themselves the associations of hunting, the bloodshed of hunting, the flaying of animals, their exhibition in butcher's shops, to the extent that the word "skin" in the expression "get under the skin" ("gehen mir unter die Haut" 48) in Sebald's prose, which one might pass over as a "proverbial" expression the terms of which have ceased to live, gains a literal force. It tells of flayed skin and of a violent intrusion. It is also telling that in his summary of Flaubert's text Sebald emphasizes, in keeping with the previous focus on the Corsican hunting season, Julian's slaughter of animals, without mentioning the arguably more prominent scenario of the killing of both mother and father by their son. And that Sebald also foregrounds Julian's final encounter with the leper, where the skin again comes into play: "On the opposite bank Julian must share the ferryman's bed, and then, as he embraces the man's fissured and ulcerated flesh, partly hard and gnarled, partly deliquescent, spending the night breast to breast and mouth to mouth with that most repellent of human beings, he is released from his torment and may rise into the blue expanses of the

firmament" (46). Sebald permits himself a degree of license with this account, since in Flaubert's *conte* it is Julian who is the ferryman, and the old man his passenger, and, while Sebald's "breast to breast and mouth to mouth" ("Brust an Brust und Mund an Mund") translates Flaubert's words ("bouche contre bouche, poitrine contre poitrine" Flaubert 187), Sebald elaborates somewhat in the description of the skin, of which Flaubert writes only that it was "as cold as a snake and as rough as a file" ("plus roide qu'un serpent et rude comme une lime"; Flaubert 69/187).

What is it about this scene that so repels and attracts Sebald that he amplifies its descriptive qualities? Given the seam of imagery and reference which I have explored so far, I would suggest that it is the quality of deliquescence, the delinquency of the skin as it is shed, and the experience of contact with such an entity, which focuses Sebald's attention. I want to suggest that the motifs of being skin to skin with someone, the motif of a skin which is shed, of a skin which is barely living tissue, which is almost or definitively already dead, and the amorous fantasy of an encounter with an illicit skin programmes, implicitly or explicitly, the literary enterprise as Sebald conceives of it and practices it.

The danger, for Julian, the risk, which earns him, after everything, his apotheosis, is that of contamination. Perhaps what repels Sebald, and the risk that he runs and in effect embraces, is that the leprosy will infect him too, that the mania for flayed skin will transport itself into his imagination, that his skin too will shrink like Raphael's and like Chatwin's. The spectre of a different disease is at stake here, the AIDS virus which Chatwin contracted, of which one of the symptoms in his case was an infection of the skin, which he fantasmatically re-invented as a rare fungal infection contracted in an exotic location. Sebald, however, translates this differently into his own mania and his own obsession. As if haunted by the scenes of bloodshed that result from Julian's mad passion for hunting, haunted like Julian himself, in whose dreams they recur, Sebald projects such scenes of destruction onto the outlines of the rock formations of the Scandola peninsula, seen in the sunset from his hotel window in Piana as he looks across the Bay of Fijacola:

> The monstrous rock formations of Les Calanques, carved from granite over millions of years by wind, salt mist and rain, and towering up 300 metres from the depths, shone in fiery copper red as if the stone itself were in flames, glowing from within. Sometimes I thought I saw the outlines of plants and animals burning in that flickering light, or the

> shapes of a whole race of people stacked into a great pyre. Even the water below seemed to be aflame. (47)

The significant addition, of course, is the destruction of a "whole race of people," in which one cannot fail to recognize a moment in the history of Germany and of Europe which stands behind all of Sebald's prose as the destruction without remainder – not only that which took place in the camps but also the aerial bombardment of German cities by the Allies – by which he is repelled just as he strives to bring it to remembrance (see *On the Natural History of Destruction*). The skin, the surface of the text, which connects Flaubert to Sebald to Chatwin to Balzac, is stretched only thinly over this vortex of destruction, in which the trace of the past and of past lives is forever vanishing.

Near the beginning of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, after the narrator recalls his setting out to "walk the county of Suffolk," then recalls his stay in hospital a year later when he began to assemble his thoughts in order to write the book we are now reading, we encounter the names of two of Sebald's colleagues at the University of East Anglia, Michael Parkinson and Janine Dakyns, both of whom had recently died, one after the other, the second seemingly in shock

and despair because of the loss of the first.[1] Parkinson, Sebald writes, "was found dead in his bed, lying on his side and already quite rigid, his face curiously mottled with red blotches" (6). Richardson's death was fast followed by that of Dakyns, of whom Sebald writes: "Janine Rosalind Dakyns was so unable to bear the loss of the ingenuous, almost childlike friendship they had shared, that a few weeks after his death she succumbed to a disease that swiftly consumed her body" (7).

Michael Parkinson was a lecturer who worked in French and in Comparative Literature at UEA who died at the age of 49 in 1994. Janine Dakyns also died indeed in 1994, having been a Lecturer in the School of Modern Languages at the University of East Anglia since 1969, after Glasgow and University College London, and having also served for some time as Treasurer of the Society for French Studies. Their obituaries appear in the same issue of *French Studies*, by John Fletcher and Clive Scott respectively. Dakyns was the author of a study of medievalism in the 19th-century, *The Middle Ages in French Literature 1851 to 1900*, and for some time responsible for the 19th-century French section of the *Year's Work in Modern Language Studies*. Like Parkinson she also left an unfinished project, her "life's work" on Flaubert,

which despite Clive Scott's promise in his obituary to bring them to publication remains inaccessible (see Scott).[2]

This book would no doubt, however, have extended her account of the significance of Flaubert's medievalism, and in particular of his St. Julien as its apogee. In an extensive homage to Parkinson and Dakyns Sebald extemporizes upon Dakyn's obsessive intimacy with Flaubert, and it seems, with his dreams. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> Flaubert, Janine said, was convinced that everything he had written hitherto consisted solely in a string of the most abysmal errors and lies, the consequences of which were immeasurable. Janine maintained that the source of Flaubert's scruples was to be found in the relentless spread of stupidity which he had observed everywhere, and which he believed had already invaded his own head. It was (so supposedly once he said) as if one were sinking into sand. This was probably the reason, she said, that sand possessed such significance in all of Flaubert's works. Sand conquered all. Time and again, said Janine, vast dust clouds drifted through Flaubert's dreams by day and by night, raised over the arid plains of the African continent and moving north across

the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula till sooner or later they settled like ash from a fire on the Tuileries gardens, a suburb of Rouen or a country town in Normandy, penetrating into the tiniest crevices. In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's dress, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas Mountains. Many a time, at the end of a working day, Janine would talk to me about Flaubert's view of the world, in her office where there were such quantities of lecture notes, letters and other documents lying around that it was like standing amidst a flood of paper. On the desk, which was both the origin and the focal point of this amazing profusion of paper, a virtual paper landscape had come into being in the course of time, with mountains and valleys. Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing imperceptibly towards the centre of the room. Years ago, Janine had been obliged by the ever-increasing masses of paper on her desk to bring further tables into use, and these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe. The carpet, too, had long since vanished beneath several

> inches of paper; indeed, the paper had begun climbing from the floor, on which year after year, it had settled, and was now up the walls as high as the top of the door frame, page upon page of memoranda and notes pinned up in multiple layers, all of them by just one corner. Wherever it was possible there were piles of papers on the books on her shelves as well. It once occurred to me that at dusk, when all of this paper seemed to gather into itself the pallor of the fading light, it was like the snow in the fields, long ago, beneath the ink-black sky. (7-9)

Sebald's prose evolves here through a number of metamorphoses, or perhaps of metamorphic accretions, without abrupt shifts; the sand which Flaubert, according to Janine, feared would engulf him, becomes dust, then ash, before transferring its tidal, invasive value to the papers in Janine's office, which then become like a primordial snow. As Santner remarks, dust and ash are privileged substances in Sebald's œuvre, representing a liminal state between matter and nothingness, the residue of an event of destruction and loss which as I have remarked above, suffuses Sebald's writing with melancholy and ruination (99-100). Sand, ash, and dust are summoned here for their signification of processes of reduction and erosion; they are, in the case of ash and dust, a further stage or perhaps a different orientation from the processes

of deliquescence and destruction of the skin; but I think they also convey viral qualities of invasiveness, qualities thus transferred to the paper which "settles" like snow in Janine Dakyn's office. I think too that this quality is associated with the "curiously mottled" state of Michael Parkinson's skin, and with the "swift consumption" of Janine's body which leads to her death, as if some mysterious and unnamed, unnamable force is passing across the surfaces and the skins of things, overtaking Flaubert's writing too, and that of Sebald; sand, dust, ash, snow, paper all propose a consumption of the surface, of the skin. And this process too inhabits writing, as if catching up with it.

Sebald's prose evinces two distinct logics of the skin, two processes: shrinking and contamination. The body of the writer, Chatwin, or of Balzac's protagonist, Raphael, is bound to mortality by a skin that shrinks. Skin becomes the index, the envelope of a finite and ever-shortening life span, mirrored by a collective memory and a historical span that is also receding, shrinking to instantaneity, passing into an incorporeal and immaterial, spectral emanation which nevertheless haunts and fringes material things and sites. But in the curious blotches that seem to transfer themselves from Michael Richardson's body to the papers in Janine Dakyn's office, to the snow which Sebald, or Sebald's narrative avatar, imagines falling around her, we witness a

different logic: the skin as a surface of contagion and expansion. Skin becomes remnant and relic both by shrinking and by being shed, like a flayed layer, from the living body it envelops, as with Flaubert's leper re-imagined by Sebald. Both processes – shrinking and peeling – show a process of ruination at work, a natural history of decay and of destruction.

In this Sebald's figures are subject to what Walter Benjamin, and after him Adorno, would propose with the word *Naturgeschichte*, natural history as a logic of transience and destruction to which both material, natural forms and human bodies, artifacts and edifices are subjected (see Hanssen). Shrinking and shed skin are corporeal emblems of this natural history, and dust is a substance privileged for its qualities of both invasiveness and reduction. Santner explains as follows the strange notion of natural history in Benjamin's work:

> natural history is borne out of the dual possibilities that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality. Natural history transpires against the

> background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the "undead." (17)

Natural history refers, for Santner, to the fact that "the artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life" (16). The epitome of such a form is of course the *ruin*, which as Benjamin states in the *Trauerspiel* is where "history has physically merged into the setting" (Benjamin 178). But it is uncannily significant that in seeking to account for the way in which elements of life, having lost their link to vitality, become "enigmatic signifiers," Santner accounts for the way in which they "continue to address us" with the figure of speech in which these elements "get under our psychic skin" (17).[3] The skin returns as a motif where it is a question of a loss of vitality and yet the persistence of a material form beyond its living presence. There is an uncanny resonance across the instances of shed or flayed skin, which then, having lost its vital connections, may return in the form of parchment, and become a surface on which those very enigmatic signifiers may be written.

This is perhaps because, as Santner develops later, the "enigmatic signifiers" of natural history" or "second nature" are endowed with what he calls a "spectral materialism," here referring directly to the way in which, in Sebald's texts, the "substance of lived space," or in Benjaminian language, "the setting," has absorbed the "persistence of past suffering" (57). In this light Santner reads Sebald's works, and *The Rings of Saturn* in particular, as a "concentrated evocation of *Naturgeschichte*," as a consistent exploration of the utterly fallen, and thus "creaturely" nature of human history (104). It is for this reason, Santner argues, that dust and ash are such privileged substances in Sebald's work, as suggested earlier. In an echo of Sebald's comment on Chatwin, that in his work "the way through the world is taken from the first with an eye fixed on the writer's own end," Santner points to Jacques Austerlitz's comment on monuments and fortifications that they are "designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (24).

In response to this overwhelming impression of a procession towards disaster, of the inevitable process of decay, and the corruption of the flesh – to come back to the motif of deliquescence – Santner asks "whether Sebald's world leaves any opening for […] a shift in subjective dispositions. Is there a conception, in his work, of what it might mean to suspend our bondage to

Naturgeschichte? Or is Sebaldian jouissance so thoroughly tied up with the sex appeal of decay, so addicted to dust, ash, and bones, that there is no longer a desire for a way out?" (134).

Santner's answer to these questions is to point, on the one hand, to the literary nature of Sebald's enterprise (rather than a political or directly ethical status), but he also stresses the dependence of Sebald's writing on chance and coincidence, a mechanism which allows for the shifts of perspective and an alteration of the subjected nature of Sebald's creatures. Santner also draws these aleatory encounters close to Proust's *moments bienheureux*, and points to the ways in which Sebald "radicalizes" a Proustian poetics of involuntary memory. He also compares the encounter between author, character and reader in Sebald's works as akin to the kind of encounter at stake in psychoanalysis, where one's creaturely subjection can be as if re-aligned through engagement with the "neighbour" (140-1).

These hopeful possibilities notwithstanding, we have to ask if Sebald's work is haunted by the same promise or threat of an ultimate messianic intervention or of divine violence, ambivalently present in Benjamin's ethos, the promise or threat of an event which would redeem or interrupt the procession of ruins

which history proffers. Sebald's figures seem, I would venture, following Santner, irredeemably fallen; they live half-lives, in the margins and abandoned spaces barely discernible in our contemporary surroundings. Perhaps in the memorial function of writing, in allowing space, preparing a ground, for his two former colleagues Michael Richardson and Janine Dakyns, as well as in the essay on Chatwin, Sebald proposes something that might slow, if not stop, the process of ruination and forgetting that draws everything to dust and obsolescence. But then, in a curious dialectic, one which runs out rather than limps or stutters, these memories and instances are themselves forgotten, passed over, as the digressive prose moves seamlessly onto other terrain, different ground. Unless one is to read Sebald's works, or indeed his works, his œuvre, not as a passage, a process, but rather, heeding Benjamin here, as a constellation, something like an image or an allegory, an immutable form which can endure, despite its delicacy. Is *endurance* the form of redemption which Sebald can offer his creatures? Flaubert certainly seems to favour this ethos; after Julian's orgy of destruction, the encounter with the leper is the catalyst of his salvation. But the end of Flaubert's *conte* only arrives through a narratorial intervention inviting the reader to go and verify the tale in a stained glass window of the church in his neighbourhood, another surface, in which dust and sand have attained a hardness of form which

endures: “And that is the story of Saint Julian Hospitator almost exactly as you will find it told in a stained-glass window in a church near to where I was born” (70).

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[1] John Beck discusses Sebald's account of Dakyns in 'Reading Room', pp. 79-80.
[2] An excerpt from Sebald's *The Emigrants* appears in Smith, 1996.
[3] Santner draws the notion of the 'enigmatic signifier' from the work of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, for whom it refers to the (usually sexual) messages the infant encounters from the adult world which it is unable to decode or assimilate or "metabolize" (34). These unassimilated enigmatic signifiers are left behind in the form of unconscious residues. Santner proposes that such signifiers are "loci of signifying stress" (34), that they arise specifically at that threshold between meaning and the body that Santner calls "creaturely".